

PINE BARRENS--DOUBLE TROUBLE
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Although I've been a member of NANFA for about 16 or 17 years, this is my first attempt at an article, so let's see how it goes.

I'm sure we've all experienced different levels of interest in our hobby at different times, for a variety of reasons. I really hadn't gone collecting much for two or three years; that realization really hit me all at once during the late summer of 1992. I had a month or so left to go collecting or go through the winter with some bare tanks.

Coming from the northeast part of the country, the choice was easy--a Pine Barrens excursion. A couple hours of driving and I was there. First stop, an area of south central New Jersey, in Double Trouble State Park. This park was written up in Tropical Fish Hobbyist Magazine many years ago for its native fish and fauna. Beautiful, clean, white sand, and clear, tea-colored water. Scrubby pines and other plants and bushes are abundant, identifying the area as "pine barrens." Definitely unique.

The lake itself was several hundred yards in circumference with tree stumps and bushes choking the shoreline. In the water along the shore was plenty of cabomba, probably introduced. In I went with sneakers, shorts, and my 4'x4'seine. I began catching young Blackbanded Sunfish (*Enneacanthus chaetodon*) along with Banded Sunfish (*E. obesus*). The chaetodons were beautiful--black bands on a silvery background, metallic green gill plates, and bright, orange-edged ventral fins, much more impressive than those pitiful-looking ones that show up occasionally in pet shops. The obesus were lighter-colored than I remembered, but speckled with blue-green, gold, and purple spots over a light olive background.

Some larger sunfish turned up in the seine, and I was quite surprised to see how really large *Enneacanthus* can grow in their natural environment. One Blackbanded Sunfish was pushing 4", easily the largest I had ever seen. He went back in to keep the population going. I only kept about seven chaetodons from 1" to 2". The younger ones always make an easier transition to aquarium life. I released all the obesus and anything else that occasionally made its way into the net, such as Eastern Mudminnows (*Umbra pygmaea*), young bullhead catfish (*Ameiurus [Ictalurus] natalis* or *nebulosus*), Banded Killifish (*Fundulus diaphanus*), and several small Chain Pickerel (*Esox niger*). So far, so good.

Next stop, in Toms River, N.J., further north, was not much of a pine-barrens environment. It is a large lake which I believe to be somewhat brackish, though I've never measured the salinity. Many people fish the lake for bass, pickerel, perch, catfish, and the two larger sunfish, the Bluegill (*Lepomis macrochira*) and the Pumpkinseed (*L. gibbosa*). In the quiet, well-planted areas of the lake was my quarry, the Bluespotted Sunfish (*E. gloriosus*). This is

a place I've visited for many years, and it is interesting to note the changes as the years go by. Over the years, I've caught quite a variety of fish here--Banded Killifish, bullheads, mudminnows, young pickerel with red fins (either Redfin Pickerel, *Esox americanus americanus*, or a race of Chain Pickerel with red fins, Mud Sunfish (*Acantharchus pomotis*), American Eels (*Anguilla rostrata*), Pumpkinseeds and Bluegills, Threespine Sticklebacks (*Gasterosteus aculeatus*), and Tesselated Darters (*Etheostoma olmstedi*).

Also found were Blue Crabs and freshwater shrimp. I haven't seen the Mudminnows, sticklebacks, or Mud Sunfish (these were colorful ones for such a drab species, with bright yellow bellies) in several years now. At the time I caught the sticklebacks, they were in breeding colors. They were a very striking fish about 2½" long, silver with brilliant vermilion bellies.

Using my 4'x4' seine or 4' dipnet, I began locating the Bluespotted in the densely planted areas (mainly cabomba again). All I was able to find were smaller ones, an inch or less in length. Still, I was able to sex them, with the young males having an olive to black background color, faint bars, and light blue spots sprinkled on the flanks. The females had the same background color, with few or no spots. Here also, I kept only six.

All fish made it home safely with no losses. I only kept the Bluespotted and Blackbanded Sunfish since both species are very shy, especially when kept with more aggressive fish, including the Banded Sunfish, largest and most robust of the three *Enneacanthus* species. They seem to do best when kept in single-species tanks where they will get their share of food. I've been feeding them mainly frozen foods such as brine shrimp, bloodworms, and glass larvae, with occasional feedings of live blackworms. Currently they are all peacefully coexisting in a crowded 10-gallon tank, with a box filter, low natural lighting (to emulate their natural habitat), and a proliferation of Java moss. Over the next few weeks, I hope to have time to transplant them into a 20-long tank, before spring arrives. After wintering, these small sunfish really take on beautiful color, especially with an increase of live-food offerings. I've never had either species breed, so it will be interesting to see what they do this spring.

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NOTE: "Chaetodons" is what veteran aquarists have traditionally called Blackbanded Sunfish--Ed.